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ABSTRACT

In the past 30 years, research has suggested the need for much smaller high schools. In response, some administrators have attempted to subdivide big high schools into smaller entities. This digest reviews recent research on the movement to break up large schools and discusses five types of error common to such attempts--errors of autonomy, size, continuity, time, and control. Large high schools have frequently been broken up into schools within a school (SWAS) serving 200-500 students. This strategy attempts to personalize the familiar comprehensive high school, but characteristics built into the design of most breakup efforts make it impossible for the SWAS to develop a small-school culture. Five common errors bar many schools from crossing the big/small cultural divide: (1) longstanding big-school traditions and overarching functions undermine SWAS efforts to build their own identities; (2) SWAS are planned to be large enough to have individual principals, but this size ensures that the faculty will be too big to socially construct the vision of the new, small school; (3) specialized programs and experiences segregate younger students from older ones and create more transitions for student to accomplish; (4) traditional schedules prevent a personalized, spontaneous response to an unexpected learning opportunity; and (5) the big building that houses multiple SWAS continues the old control issues of the big school. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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Breaking Up Large High Schools: Five Common (and Understandable) Errors of Execution

Tom Gregory

ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
DIGEST

Essentially all of the research on high school size conducted in the past 30 years suggests that we need to move to much smaller schools (Gregory, 2000). In response to these findings, school administrators have attempted to subdivide big high schools into smaller entities. This Digest reviews recent research on the movement to break up large schools and discusses five types of error common among such attempts—errors of autonomy, of size, of continuity, of time, and of control.

Consensus Favoring Small High Schools Grows, While Schools Get Larger

Research on school size has changed over time. Studies conducted 30 or more years ago tended to favor larger schools. More recently, research has favored smaller schools (or called into question the interpretations of earlier research). The research is complicated by semantics; "small" to some means under 200 students; many see a realistic goal to be 400-500 students; and a few see high schools of 800 as small enough. And size, of course, has little direct effect on how schools function. It is a set of mediating variables that has the more direct impact to which we should direct our attention.

Space does not allow an adequate summary of the research on school size, but several good reviews are available (Cotton, 1996; Williams, 1990; Raywid, 1999; and Gregory, 2000). Even the popular literature of the past few years has been sprinkled with articles extolling the virtues and successes of small schools. This public dialogue is reflected in a recent national poll of high school parents and teachers; 66 percent of the parents and 79 percent of the teachers favored smaller high schools (Public Agenda, 2001). Heeding the message, large high schools are now attempting to remake themselves into smaller, more personal institutions.

Cotton (in press) reviews a newer body of research and commentary on the widespread efforts to create small learning communities in large schools. The Learning First Alliance (2001) has provided an extensive treatment of efforts to downsize that focuses on safety issues, and Nathan and Febey (2001) describe the reconfigured physical settings of 22 newly created small schools in 12 states. Two recent major studies in urban contexts document the promise of recent breakup efforts. Stiefel, Iatarola, Fruchter, and Berne (2000) analyzed cost and achievement data for all of New York City's high schools, both large and small, and Wasley et al. (2000) have described in detail the early successes of Chicago's small elementary, middle, and high schools.

Despite growing support for smaller schools, high schools have continued to grow in size. This disparity exists for several reasons. The high school plays a complex role in its community. Reformer Ted Sizer calls it a "diabolically complicated system" (1996, p. xi). The high school is often more than a place of learning. It may be one of the few entities that unifies a community—a source of community pride and a central gathering place.

Breaking Up Large High Schools

As mentioned earlier, one response to calls for smaller schools is to break up big high schools into smaller entities, each typically serving 200 to 500 students. *Breaking Ranks* (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996), a widely-used manual for breaking up a big school to create schools within a school (SWAS), suggests a maximum of 600 students. Rather than changing the form of schooling, proposals favoring schools of this size seem to be modest efforts—what Wasley and Lear (2001) term shallow implementations—to personalize a familiar model that is fundamentally impersonal in nature. The idea is not new, dating back at least to the "house" structures of the '60s.

There is little evidence that this strategy is successful, even though hundreds of high schools currently are pursuing it.[1] If the central intent of such breakup efforts is simply to create more personal forms of the familiar comprehensive high school, many recent attempts may have achieved a certain success. But the goals of these efforts suggest more; they seem to seek a cultural renaissance, not a remodeling (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996).

A pervasive problem is that characteristics built into the basic design of most breakup efforts make it impossible for them to cross over into the world of successful new small schools which do have very different cultures (Meier, 1995; Gregory, 1993). Five common errors—of autonomy, size, continuity, time, and control—bar many schools from crossing the big/small cultural divide.

Errors of Autonomy

An oft-stated goal of breakup efforts is that the former, big school with all its traditions—interscholastic sports, clubs, music groups—will remain. These entities are the very—arguably the only—cultural glue that still binds together all the disparate pieces of big, anonymous schools. Mixed allegiances are difficult to maintain. The long established big school culture tends to kill off the nascent small school cultures. Some services—counseling, discipline, food service—may also remain centralized, either to nurture the big-school identity, comply with its notions of specialization, or achieve economies of scale in the big building's infrastructure. Because these services remain the tasks of specialists, each tends to become depersonalized and remote from the more local lives of the SWAS. These factors undermine SWAS efforts to build their own identities.

Errors of Size

In breakup efforts, SWAS are often designed as administrative units that are big enough—400 to 600 students—to justify a principal. Then the faculties of each SWAS are so large—25 to 40 teachers—that they have almost as much trouble talking to each other as large high school faculties do. Socially constructing the vision of the new, small school becomes more difficult. Consequently, faculties revert to big-school strategies: either the vision is created by the principal and teachers are expected to go along with it, or some sort of representative governance council is created. Under either of these circumstances, the vision has to be very persuasive or very familiar to gain the faculty's endorsement. The latter is frequently the case, which tends to preserve the big-school culture.

Errors of Continuity

Every high school contains three kinds of students: beginners who need orientation and acclimation, those who are completing their requirements for graduation, and those who are somewhere in between. A natural response to these stages is to create specialized programs for each of these groups.

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(The majority of the proposals received thus far by the U.S. Office of Education Small Learning Communities grant program entailed the creation of transition programs for freshmen.) Similarly, some schools seek to develop senior institutes. But each of these smaller experiences creates more transitions to be accomplished and segregate older students from younger ones. They are predicated on the age-old idea that only the older generation can teach the young what they must know to succeed (Mead, 1970). As a result, just as students establish themselves in a new setting, they are asked to move on. Just at the time when they become valuable teachers and leaders of younger students, they are removed to a new setting where they are once again off-balance beginners.

Errors of Time

Continuing to offer esoteric electives across all SWAS is an attractive option in these subschool configurations. It is seen as a way to maintain the best of both worlds: the rich curriculum of a large, comprehensive high school and the more personalized environment of a small school. To accommodate movement between SWAS, they often adopt a common bell schedule. But the bell schedule makes it difficult to do much programmatically that's different from what the big school was able to do. It may, for example, make it difficult for an individual student or a group of students to leave the campus for one day, let alone for a week or longer, to pursue learning in the community and beyond. Responding spontaneously to an unexpected learning opportunity—whether it's a visiting author or a full solar eclipse that will be visible in a nearby state—is almost as remote a possibility for the SWAS as it is for a large high school. Traditional schedules also promote traditional notions of faculty load. For example, powerful advising programs that go hand-in-hand with high levels of independent learning become difficult to justify.

Errors of Control

That so little independent learning occurs in big schools is not accidental; such independence is antithetical to the levels of control that must take primacy in them. Confining so many students in one place creates a situation that is uncomfortable for the adult community (Sizer, 1984), one that quickly becomes scary if not kept under tight control. Freedom of movement is a necessary prerequisite to many powerful forms of learning. Students must be well-known and trusted for such freedom to be possible. Even much smaller SWAS still have the problem of their students being strangers when they move elsewhere in the building. Because many control problems of big schools remain in a big building, many of the control issues that constrain more informal teaching and learning also remain.

Getting Reform Right

Reform is devilishly difficult to pull off, even under the most favorable of circumstances. Many schools of our future, even some spawned by breaking up big high schools, will have quite different cultures than the archetypical American comprehensive high school. Large high schools can find help in avoiding the errors described here by taking advantage of the extensive technical assistance now available. Two regional sources of assistance are rapidly gaining national status. They are the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago (http://www.smallschoolsworkshop.org), and the Small Schools Project of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington (http://www.smallschoolsproject.org). Both run conferences and workshops and maintain Web sites rich in resources. Several brief but helpful advice papers are available from the Small Schools Project (Center on Reinventing Public Education, n.d.-a,b,c) and Kathleen Cotton's recent review (in press) is a must-read for those contemplating breaking up large high schools.

Can we expect large high schools to reculture themselves so completely? Can they do it? Half the responding teachers in large high schools in the aforementioned Public Agenda survey (2001) anticipated widespread opposition from their communities if a breakup effort were attempted. In the next 10 years we should know whether creating truly new small schools out of existing large high schools is even possible.

[1]The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is funding the breakup of about 50 high schools in Washington state alone.

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